



Urban Peripheries: The Political Dynamics of Planning Projects
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THE URBAN PERIPHERY AND NEW AGENDAS OF URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

The urban periphery has become a highly dynamic space. The consolidation of polycentric urban patterns and the emergence of outer urban poles raise fundamental questions for planners. Spatial planning needs to redefine intervention approaches and instruments to address new spatial dynamics in times of weaker economic growth, stable real-estate markets, and post-modern household life choices. The innovative potential of the periphery lies in two particular challenges. First, there is a need to experiment, define, activate, and institutionalize new *spatial qualities* in these outer areas. Second, there is a need to achieve better coordination of spatial policies across jurisdictional borders and to institutionalize polycentric spatial concepts.

The thesis investigates the political processes that drive the redevelopment of the urban periphery. It explores how major planning agents reconfigure their relationships in order to respond to changed symmetries between core locations and peripheral zones. It aims at understanding *why*, given the spatial, functional, and economic conditions of today's metropolitan areas, we see particular planning approaches to peripheral development occur while others fail to address the challenges of collective action. It hypothesizes that more progressive planning concepts and the strategies of outer areas depend on the realignment of core municipality planning strategies and national planning policies with regional market investment strategies.

The research investigates three major redevelopment projects in Paris, Amsterdam, and Milan metropolitan areas: Paris Nord-Est, Amsterdam Northwest (ZaanIJ-North Banks), and Milan-Sesto San Giovanni's ex-Falck brownfield development. The research looks at the political tensions and dilemmas that drive these planning policies.

DIVERSITY OF RESPONSES OF PERIPHERAL DEVELOPMENT

The empirical investigation of the three projects shows different planning responses to the challenges of peripheral development. Despite the common city-regional strategies of growth, local agendas tend to differentiate according to implementation techniques, planning processes, and major issues addressed. There are three types of urban development:

Cross-border: in Paris, peripheral development became a tool to overcome enrooted divisions between the core city and its banlieue. Inter-municipal development in Paris' dense zone is embryonic, with emerging experiments of both bottom-up coordination (Paris Métropole) and top down practices of regional planning (Grand Pari(s)). Paris Nord-Est innovatively addresses issues of spatial, political, and ideological fragmentation by means of a unitary planning project, driven by the municipality of Paris. A cross-border coalition of core city politicians, neighboring municipalities, regional government, and market actors is using Paris Nord-Est to advance broader urban agendas. The project is pinned on a set of coordinated interventions under the leadership of Paris Municipality: a new connection of a tramway around the city which crosses the municipal border; an inter-municipal neighborhood crossing the motorway, and a public-private flagship redevelopment project of an existing landmark. The project is enabled with the direct participation of property investors, active in the development of the whole northeast of Paris.

Isolated peripheral development: the redevelopment of Sesto San Giovanni's ex-Falck site reveals a localistic planning process jeopardized by long lasting gridlocks in the negotiation between development corporations and local political majorities. The major planning challenge regards the pursuit of agreement between the need to activate a risky project, the political will to maintain small scale industrial spaces in the city, and the need to address socio-economic change in the area. Locally enrooted left wing majorities

conflict with large development corporations over possible scenarios of development, and the process is permeated by ideological considerations. The (most recent) negotiations seeking resolution of this planning issue have suffered from a parochial planning process, disconnected from broader dynamics of city-regional planning and metropolitan governance.

Organic development: in Amsterdam metropolitan area, the northwest periphery became a space for political and planning experimentation. Yet, past attempts to define a long term plan for the area have failed. Today the project is a patchwork of small scale interventions trying to address the combination of industrial usages, new housing supply, and environmental protection within the North Sea Canal area. The Northwest is, however, considered a space that can address accommodate housing, creative economies, flexible forms of production, and new forms of urbanities. The organic approach is geared to flexibly address the uncertainty of development. However, this approach entails fundamental dilemmas over the long term planning of Amsterdam metropolitan area. They regard the use and legitimacy of existent regulative frameworks for zoning and green protection (regulation dilemma), the calculation of risk in long term public investments (spatial investment dilemma), and the need to readdress developmental priorities of the whole city region (intervention dilemma).

THE POLITICAL CHALLENGES OF PLANNING INNOVATION

In order to explain why these different planning approaches occur, the research focuses on how political dynamics and changing electoral geographies combine with market pressures in these areas. The major subjects of these confrontations are the national and regional governments (and their respective planning strategies), the core municipalities (their visions over the metropolitan area), and the large development corporations (and their profit expectations).

The three cases show very different political constellations and dynamics. Yet, their comparison finds that, despite different political contingencies, progressive planning efforts towards the periphery might emerge from a convergence of the instrumental interests of all the three major agents mentioned. Also, conflicting relationships might constitute a basis to proactively address the periphery as a planning issue. Yet, the nature of this relationship affects the typology of planning outcomes.

Cross-border development in Paris emerges from a political and electoral confrontation over the northern periphery of the city. The progressive left has instrumentally built a discourse around the area to rejuvenate political bonds with the communist majorities in the northern banlieue. These political alliances are instrumental to counteract national top-down projects in the metropolitan area, proposed by right wing majorities. The periphery is thus an electoral issue, over which two major ideologies are confronted. Within this confrontation, Paris' progressive coalition pushes for a new socially oriented agenda and finds large local development corporations as a partner in this endeavor. The overlap between the electoral interests of local constituencies and economic/financial ambitions of regional property developers makes it possible to turn the border into a planning target.

The isolation of the Sesto San Giovanni project reflects parochial politics in Milan's metropolitan area. The large scale project is kept local by municipal left wing majorities, turning it into an instrument of political *power-holding*. Local majorities are focusing on protecting declining working class constituencies. This approach is strengthened by a mono-centric strategy employed by Milan municipality that focuses on its core within a competitive regional environment. This separation is exacerbated by electoral issues. Sesto San Giovanni still attempts to maintain its position as a productive working-class city, while Milan has long been a laboratory for the growing new liberal right in both regional and national politics. Possible attempts at coalition building suffer a lack of reflections on the gains that metropolitan development can bring about for that project.

The organic development of Amsterdam Northwest reflects the political uncertainty of Amsterdam's metropolitan area, with particular focus on the North Sea Canal. The project is lobbied at the regional and national level by local progressive left wing parties in Amsterdam, Amsterdam's northern district, and in the neighboring Zaanstad. The progressive erosion of most conservative socialist groups has opened up opportunities to trigger a change in the area. Yet, the project delineates an endogenous confrontation within Amsterdam council about possible scenarios of growth and crisis recovery. There is opposition between pro-harbor/industry related parties and fractions sustaining a more pro-active approach to transformation. The position of national planning agencies exacerbates this uncertainty, allowing a less straightforward development approach. The national majorities push for an agenda of urban growth and indirectly push for housing development, but they also transfer responsibility for housing and environmental policies to local governments. Planning agents at central levels are progressively adopting meta-governing roles with more open spatial agendas. Under these conditions, planning Amsterdam's northwest periphery becomes an opportunity to politically question the institutional basis of city planning. These questions address the capacity of zoning to enable bottom-up development, the design of new forms of public investment and new calculations of long term returns, and the need to discuss the role of publicly led projects in the frame of city-regional development.

THE RELEVANCE OF POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN PLANNING EMERGENT SPACES

The specific conclusions of three different cases can be summarized into three encompassing reflections. These conclusions are not generalizable to contexts other than those investigated but they can inform further hypotheses of research into the political dynamics of planning.

- *The periphery is politically constructed:* the emerging polycentrism of cities is not only an expression of shifting geographies of investment but it also entails political and electoral calculations by public actors in power. These calculations might diverge from mainstream definitions of economic growth and might even hinder developmental policies. Local politics show conservative traits under conditions of isolation, while they are pushed to change planning approaches when there is political pressure over these areas. The periphery is often instrumentalized by different political groups to advance particular views on regional growth.

- *The periphery is a planning object in tension:* the emergence of planning agendas for outer spaces entails (and requires) a reconfiguration of consolidated power constellations. National and upper levels of government are still active players despite progressive decentralization policies. They struggle to address local dynamics and capture the economic potential of peripheral areas. Core municipalities are still powerful players in driving policies for outer areas, as they respond to changed investment geographies. This suggests that they depend more and more on the dynamism of their surroundings. Peripheral municipalities are becoming more active players in city-regional governance, but their position in urban development is not yet mature: it is reactive and bound to other subjects.

- *The periphery as a lab to challenge planning paradigms.* The new urban question for peripheral areas questions the essential bases of planning. Definitions of core and periphery, borders, and urbanity are blurred. These challenges are not only organizational but concern the meaning of ‘governing’ peri-urban change, in times of slow or no-growth, across consolidated jurisdictional borders. The work suggests that the transformation of the periphery can be a space for

political experimentation, to experiment and design new planning concepts and instruments. In particular, further exploration might go in the direction of financial innovation in demand-led planning, contextualized uses of planning rules, and a new role for public agents in achieving planning through projects. Yet, this is not possible without a confrontation of political groups in power on fundamental planning institutions like the definition of economic growth, the cogency of prediction-based spatial plans on spontaneous change, and the position of outer areas within political metropolitan platforms.